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## DO "IRON CURTAINS" HAPPEN MORE THAN ONCE?

by William Yoder

Dr. William Yoder, writing in recent years from Moscow, as journalist for the Russian Evangelical Alliance and/or the Russian Baptist Union, is a long time expert on religion in Eastern Europe. These reports were written in August and January respectively. Yoder is a member of REE's Advisory Editorial Board.

### A Day of Multiple Commemorations

Two separations significant for World Christendom commemorated their 50<sup>th</sup> birthdays on 13 August: the construction of the Berlin Wall and the splitting up of the "All-Union Council of Evangelical Christians-Baptists". On 18 August, in one of two major Russian-language commentaries on the second event, Moscow's Mikhail Cherenkov celebrated in the news service "Protestant" the maverick and courageous spirit of the underground, "Initiativniki" Baptist movement. He described them as a "mighty spiritual" and "radical reformist" movement and exclaimed: No one could have expected that an "anti-church directive" put out by the All-Union Council could "invoke such massive resistance on the local-church level". Who would have reckoned that "simple, uneducated, inexperienced pastors from the most remote of provinces could organise a resistance movement capable of engulfing the entire Soviet Union?" Cherenkov compares its martyrs to the early church fathers who died with "For Christ alone!" on their lips. The Initiativniki were in any case also part of the "down with Moscow" sentiment still alive in the wide expanses of Russia.

But it must be remembered that the Initiativniki movement also fought other Baptists. Andreas Patz reported in Germany's Russian-language "International Christian Newspaper" on 11 August that the Initiativniki front began to unravel only two years after its founding. Initiativniki non-cooperation at an all-Union "synod" in 1963 and ugly scenes in congregations thereafter prompted many to leave its ranks. An autonomous Baptist movement apart from both the Baptist Union and the Initiativniki – Patz calls it an "opposition to the opposition" - appeared. Today, the Protestant scene in not a few Russian towns -, such as Sary Oskol and Dedovsk (near Moscow) - consists primarily of such autonomous Baptist groupings.

A blogger noted that despite Gennady Kryuchkov's warnings, lower-level "fraternisation" between registered and non-registered Baptists never ceased, especially in the realm of underground "Samizdat" printing. Kryuchkov (1926-2007) headed the Initiativniki in Russia proper from 1965 until his death 42 years later. His "underground church" was initially known as the "Council of Churches of Evangelical Christians-Baptists". After massive emigration, it was renamed the "International Union of Churches of Evangelical Christians-Baptists" (IUCECB). It recently reported a global membership of 78.015 – roughly 20.000 of them still residing on Russian soil. During its heyday (1966), the movement claimed as many as 155.000 members.

Patz' commentary describes well the pain and price of division. He reports that after 1961, roughly 1,500 Baptists (these would include registered and unregistered Pentecostals and Mennonites) were sentenced to a total of 5,000 years in prison. This works out to an average sentence of 3.33 years; thirty of these persons also died in jail.

The Initiativniki are an impressive testimony to the stalwartness of the human spirit in the face of incredible odds. But wars, including religious ones, also cause collateral damage – among children, for example. The Initiativniki patriarch Kryuchkov lived underground on the run from Soviet authorities from 1970 to 1990. Even IUCECB-circles admit today that none of his nine children

are in the Christian fold.

The anti-Semite Alexander Prokhanov, perhaps Russia's most prominent far-right writer, is chief editor of the ultra-nationalist *Zavtra* magazine. *Wikipedia* reports that he and a colleague invited the US-Nazi Donald Duke to Russia in 1999. Alexander is the grandson of Ivan Prokhanov, a leading father of Russia's Baptist and Evangelical-Christian communities. But Alexander's convictions cannot be blamed on Ivan, for Grandpa died in 1935, three years prior to the grandson's birth. But this aside is one indication of the fact that "once-Baptist-always-Baptist" does not reflect Soviet and Russian reality. More than a few of today's Russian intellectuals and politicians have one-time Baptist connections.

Patz reports that the Great Division of 1961 turned long-time friends and relatives into "irreconcilable enemies". Married couples suddenly found themselves on opposite sides of the fence, their children confused as to with whom they should attend church. "At home, children were subjected to the constant quarrelling of their parents. Disappointed, they went out into the world once they were grown. And how many of these families were driven into divorce and destruction?"

### **The Current Situation**

Today, the IUECB's adherents, the majority of whom now live in Germany and the US' Pacific Northwest, appear to reflect a movement frozen in time. The demise of the aggressive, Soviet adversary has condemned them to insignificance in the public arena. Yet much like their cousins, the Russian Orthodox Old Believers, who broke with the majority church in 1666, they insist on an aged agenda of minimal interest to today's secular societies. Yet biology will keep the movement going as long as at least a few of its many offspring continue to uphold the faith. Much like the North American Amish of Mennonite tradition, they will be of interest primarily to ethnologists and curiosity-seeking tourists. Few outsiders will consider them worthy of emulation. Non-Russian, North American missions present in Russia during the past two decades dismissed them entirely.

Resistance to authority is at the core of their belief. To accept a conciliatory position would destroy their reason to exist as a separate entity. Patz reports that the IUECB's "Historical-Analytical Department", now run by those too young to ever "have sat" or "been betrayed", has retained the methods, accusations - and mistakes - of the past. Consequently, the gulf of the past half-century is on the increase.

Patz cites a speech by Gennady Kryuchkov at the IUECB's major Tula gathering of 5-6 October 2005, in which he described the registered Baptists (today's "Russian Union of Evangelical Christians-Baptists" - RUECB) as the "broad way", and the way of his movement as the narrow one. He added: "And these two parallel paths will never cross even in eternity." Kryuchkov was apparently claiming there would be only one kind of Russian Baptist in paradise - not, that the division of 1961 would extend into heaven.

Cherenkov, though heaping the *Initiativniki* with praise at the outset of his article, admits later that the movement has lost its positive passion. It has now turned to "solidifying its structures of control and its nearly canonical traditions with its own gallery of heroic fathers and an iconostasis of martyrs". It has surrounded all of this with "a protective iron curtain". The "absence of inter-church dialogue" has kept the movement from updating its convictions to confront the dangers of the present; the course of the *Initiativniki* has consequently ended in a dead-end street. "It's an irony of history that a reforming impulse very rarely springs from the same source twice."

Mikhail Cherenkov portrays the IUECB as a progressive movement turned reactionary. I would prefer to describe the *Initiativniki* of 1961 as a "conservative resurgence" akin to the

movement within America's "Southern Baptist Convention" two decades later. The Initiativniki did not uphold progressive values, but were instead intent on restoring the past. It could be argued that they did not even uphold the banner of religious freedom when it involved those not of their own particular brand of faith.

### **The Tragedy**

Even the best of intentions can lead to the saddest of outcomes – the Initiativniki movement could therefore be described as a tragic one. They believed in their love of Christ and his Word – yet their actions have been interpreted as evidence of hatred by others. One's desire for purity and steadfastness can be understood as contempt of other positions. The Initiativniki's witness hit a low point when a Ukrainian couple in Salem, Oregon/USA was imprisoned in late 2009 for physical abuse of its children. The IUECB chose to decry the sentence as religious persecution.

It is important to understand why Germany's émigré-German-Russian church community is strewn across the ideological landscape. *Idea* magazine's Helmut Matthies has described each tiny grouping of congregations as beholden only to itself. Cooperation on a larger scale appears impossible. The Initiativniki have proven strong on remaining true to their convictions; they are much less skilled in living alongside those who think differently. They sin differently than we Westerners do, for they have been shaped by a very different past.

The Cold-War West tended to portray the Initiativniki as spiritual giants – at least until they emigrated westward. Yet they have proven to be mere mortals; it is a myth that repression automatically makes believers more angelic. Perhaps it is pride combined with fear that has forced their witness to self-destruct. In Norway a century ago, an Arctic balloonist and explorer was determined not to renege on any of his boasts. He chose instead to float northward toward a certain and frigid death. On occasion, groups are not humble enough to save their own skins. Tragically, pride may have cost the Initiativniki the fruits of their courage and suffering: "Pride cometh before the fall" (Proverbs 16,18).

Walls and divisions are a product of human sin; only a spirit of forgiveness could turn things around. A church division caused by state repression and internal sin smashed Humpty's egg. Only forgiveness could restore that egg. Limiting sin to others, to other specific groups, places and times, is always a dead-end. The Initiativniki too are mere humans.

### **Following Your Ears to Church - Comparing Three of Moscow's Newest Baptist Congregations**

Russia is famous for doing without signs or route pointers. That's especially true (voluntarily or otherwise) of Protestant meeting places.

1. One very young Moscow congregation has solved the problem in a unique fashion. All it takes to locate "Moscow City Church" (MCC) is to follow one's ears into Hotel Milan in south Moscow. At 11:00 on a Sunday morning the music will be resonating from the second floor – one simply takes the steps upward and opens the door where the beat sounds loudest. It will open to reveal a small auditorium with stage. Roughly 60 persons will be in attendance – hardly anyone over the age of 35. This congregation is only a year old and matters such as acoustic volume appear to be left to the discretion of the bandleader. The band's leader, the keyboarder, also plays a terrific sax. On the Sunday I was there, communion was served at the outset of the service to the sound of very lively music.

The preacher of the day delivered his sermon sans tie and in jeans. His question-and-answer sermon was punctuated with "Amens" and raised hands. This is one of the very few Baptist

churches of Russia which watch the clock. The one-and-only sermon lasted 31 minutes and the final song was over 80 minutes after the start of the service. (Perhaps the price of hotel space contributes to that brevity.)

This youthful congregation is an outgrowth of the Campus Crusade for Christ's student ministry. (But the graduates of a drug-rehab programme form an important second segment.) Campus Crusade has been active in Russia since 1991; Vitaly Vlasenko, head of the pastoral team, spent more than a decade with that organization. This congregation takes to heart a teaching propagated by Chicago's Willow Creek Community Church: "The bait must be tasty to the fish, not the fisherman." It's not the tastes of the old-time churchgoers that matter most.

2. Events are more staid at the three-year-old "Your Church" congregation meeting at the RUECB's (Russian Union of Evangelical Christians-Baptist) "Moscow Theological Seminary" in the east of the city. The music is contemporary, but its musicians still believe in three- and four-part harmony. The worship team consists primarily of members of the Ukrainian "Zhivaya Kaplya" (Living Drop) music group. When Evgeny Goncharenko's classical-church music courses are in session at Second Baptist Church, its semi-professional musicians do guest appearances.

Things are more festive here: Head Pastor Leonid Kartavenko may wear a ministerial collar and white sash. At least one of Your Church's two-or-so sermons will be conversational in nature – Rev. Kartavenko is a gifted communicator. All generations are present, but Pastor Kartavenko insists: "We are a church mostly for the middle-aged." The theology is inclusive. "We do not necessarily rebaptise those who believe they were sincere when they were initially baptised, say, as Orthodox." He notes that in old times, unregistered Baptists even rebaptised those who had arrived from other Baptist quarters.

"Growing is hard work", the Head Pastor adds. Membership is around 80 and increasing slowly. But I noted during a recent visit that the congregation sported many new faces: Some of those who had come from Second Baptist Church to help get things started have apparently felt free to return to their home congregation. Your Church appears in full operation. Of the three congregations listed here, only Kartavenko is able to serve nearly full-time as a pastor.

3. A third congregation also sports Second Baptist roots: Yevgeny Bakhmutsky's "Russian Bible Church" (RBC), now meeting in the RUECB's central offices on Varshavskoe Shosse. A cello replaces the brass instruments here; the music is contemporary, but subdued. Again roughly 80 members, but many more participants and guests. The congregation may have the youngest average age – few persons are over the age of 30 with more than a few children. But one active member, insists: "We are in no way trying to avoid older people." Bakhmutsky, who was until recently Director of the RUECB's national youth division, recruited many of his primary staff through his youth contacts.

Strong emphasis is placed on the spoken word; expository preaching is the order of the day. At least one of the two sermons lasts from 50 to 60 minutes; services take at least two hours. Much in the style of groups such as "Calvary Chapel", books of the Bible are preached through from beginning to end, chapter-by-chapter. The Bible is regarded as infallible on all topics, including science. Here the "sufficiency" of Scripture is a key theological term.

A great rarity: The congregation has more male than female members. The congregation stresses male leadership and has four ordained, male pastors. A member recalls: "Before the congregation was founded two years ago, Bakhmutsky spent a year discipling a core group of young men and women." Stress is placed on thorough planning and organisation; every active

participant is asked to find his/her personal ministry and task.

The services devote time to prayer – prayer for the nation and its leaders coupled with the prayers for one’s own circle of acquaintances and family members.

### **How the Three Groups Compare**

Despite their many commonalities, these three congregations differ in flavour and style. The music is loudest at MCC, calmest at RBC. Your Church offers women the greatest opportunities for leadership; RBC stresses male authority. Leonid Kartavenko believes his congregation has horizontal leadership structures; RBC stresses leadership by a team of male elders.

All three groups are adamantly evangelical, yet it is a matter of debate as to which group most resembles traditional Russian-Baptist theology. Though aspects of RBC reflect the historical Russian model – its decidedly, non-charismatic orientation for example - its Calvinist theology veers from the classical model. RBC is at least the most traditional in form.

All three groups stress a “professional”, well-prepared worship service. Electronics, AV and the Internet are taken seriously. Kartavenko reports that the majority of those watching his congregation’s services do so via the Internet ([www.yourchurch.ru](http://www.yourchurch.ru)). RBC ([www.rbcerkov.ru](http://www.rbcerkov.ru)) offers its sermons as downloadable mp3-files. MCC’s site ([Church24.ru](http://Church24.ru)) needs the most work – but they are also the youngest of the three congregations.

In all three cases, the gathering is far from over following the final “Amen”. Great stress is placed on getting acquainted. The “snack” offered at Your Church following the service usually suffices for both lunch and supper. All three take the business of fishing seriously. Winning persons “off the street” and not weaning believers away from other congregations is stressed. More than a few new members have Orthodox connections. Street evangelism is still somewhat possible in Russia: In the course of a week beginning on 4 September 2011, RBC recited the entire Bible in Moscow’s pedestrian zone “Arbat”. All three groups feature attractive excursions for the young including boat cruises, summer camps, English camps and picnics. One Your Church excursion even included parachute-jumping.

Last but not least: None of these three congregations have the word “Baptist” in their names. Yet all assure that they are not ashamed of the word “Baptist”. These congregations desire to be inclusive: They all desire to win and include those who do not want to describe themselves as Baptist. Balkmutsky explains that his congregation also wants to partner with newer congregations who have never called themselves “Baptist”. Nevertheless, all three congregations are led by past or present department heads at the RUECB’s Moscow headquarters. Vlasenko heads the RUECB’s Department for External Church Affairs; Bakhmutsky is the Union’s Senior Vice-President. Kartavenko headed its Missions Department until February 2008 and is now allied with the ex-Baptist, Evangelical-Christian businessman Alexander Semchenko. Yet Your Church remains a RUECB-member.

Many of the practices these congregations are attempting to implement were first introduced by Russia’s Charismatic movement in the 1990’s: a contemporary style of worship, youth orientation and decentralized leadership. A fourth, very large Charismatic congregation, “Tushino Evangelical Church”, retains strong past (and future?) Baptist ties.

### **The Woes of Success - Are Russian Rehabilitation Efforts “Too Successful”?**

When visiting Baptist, Charismatic and Pentecostal congregations in Western Siberia, one will usually see an entire row of silent men between the ages of 20 and 50 without women or children. These are ex-addicts and ex-convicts who have found (or are finding) their way to Christ.

It is reported that virtually all Baptist congregations in Western Siberia are involved in this work.

Rehabilitation centres allied with the Charismatic „Associated Russian Union of Christians of Evangelical-Pentecostal Faith“ (ROSKhVE) reported of 12,000 long-term “success stories” during the period from 1995 to 2005. If one includes the Baptists and Pentecostals, the total number of such converts for that period should top 20,000. (The ROSKhVE church umbrella has a membership of over 300,000.) ROSKhVE presently represents 350 rehab centres throughout Russia. Its centres can care simultaneously for 7,000 clients.

The St. Petersburg-based, Baptist “Dobry Samaryatin” (Good Samaritan) rehab ministry reports that in one area of Novosibirsk region alone, 600 of its clients have kicked the habit of drugs or alcohol and are now living completely sober lives. During the summer of 2008 in St. Petersburg region, 13 graduates of their programme married. St. Petersburg’s Mikhail Nevolin claims in the evangelical magazine *Mirt*: “Today, no sphere of Protestant social service enjoys nearly as much success as the work with drug addicts.”

Yet in response to this mounting success, Nevolin warns in the *Mirt* article from 30 January 2010 that “every coin has a flipside”. This influx of new converts is “remaking the social composition” of Protestant congregations. People released from jail or recovering from substance abuse have time on their hands. “Many of them are lonely and have no chance of obtaining a job, so they can devote more time to church life than others.” Nevolin hastens to add that ex-addicts are extremely welcome in Protestant circles, yet they are threatening to destroy the diversity of the flock. “Ideally, congregations should reflect the social composition of society in general.” He agrees that congregations targeting specific social groups do have their place, but they should be the exception and not the rule.

Nevolin fears a snow-ball effect resulting from this wave of new converts. Diversity is destroyed not only by an influx of new believers, but also by the ensuing flight of “ordinary folks who have never been associated with (former) drug addicts and criminals”. A congregation gets replaced rather than being increased. Where are the converts from the middle class, the writer asks. “Do they need the Gospel less than others?” He is hereby pointing to a quandary as old as Christendom itself. When inviting people to Christ, it is usually not the most desirable candidates, the successful and moneyed classes, who are first to accept the invitation.

Mikhail Nevolin notes the same “danger” within seminaries and Bible schools. Due to the lack of potential students, schools teaching theology are in no position to be selective in their choice of students. General speaking, he states: “Our young people are in no hurry to become pastors, missionaries or theologians”. This is undoubtedly linked to the scarcity of paid positions for graduates. Nevertheless, ex-convicts and drug addicts are as a rule eager to study theology. They tend not to have concrete plans for their lives and are more willing to adjust. They are less demanding, geographically more mobile and less hampered by family considerations. (But also less likely to emigrate.) Nevolin adds: “Those prepared to study are also supplied with food and living quarters.”

Somewhat akin to David Wilkerson’s “Teen Challenge” movement, the Charismatic, Krasnodar-based “Izkhod” (Exit or Exodus) ministry has begun planting congregations which consist primarily of former addicts graduated from its rehab programme. These young congregations are known for their hierarchical, untraditional style rooted in the drug culture. They tend to prove the position stated by Professor Vladimir Lazarev of Moscow’s „Russian Academy of Natural Sciences“: “Narcotic addiction is more than just a morbid passion. It is also a way of life, a subculture with specific symbols, a language, values and norms of behaviour.”

## The Numbers in General

Russian academics describe substance abuse as one of the three greatest dangers facing modern civilization – the other two being atomic warfare and ecological calamity. Past reports have listed from two to four million of Russia's 142 million citizens as suffering from drug addiction. This would amount at the very most to 2,8% of its population. A study from 2008 reports only 2.5 million addicts, 30,000 of whom die annually. Roughly 18% of them seek help in rehabilitation centres – about 500 of these centres are run by Protestants.

Protestant rehab programmes are known for their lack of medical expertise and medication. Clients are instead supplied with heavy dosages of Bible, prayer, confession and fellowship – beginning usually from day one. The largest Protestant ministry to addicts - the Charismatic "Novaya Zhizn" (New Life) ministry - has a centre with nearly 400 clients in Kingisepp region very near the Estonian border. Yet the typical centre has 15 or 20 clients and is located in a private dwelling in a distant village. Great stress is placed on empathy and the personal relationship with the client; all of Good Samaritan's nearly 40 centres are headed by former addicts. Therapy programmes usually take from six months to a year; the longest ones can require a stay of two to three years. Good Samaritan reports that roughly half of those coming leave the therapy programme prematurely. Yet 60% of those graduating from the programme succeed in making a complete and long-term break with substance abuse. This adds up to a success rate of 30% among those who initially began treatment. Christian sources claim that state-run institutions in the East and West relying heavily on medication for drug withdrawal have long-term success rates in the order of 2%.

The stay at a Protestant rehab centre is usually free-of-charge to the client. ROSKhVE's head, Bishop Sergey Ryakhovsky, states that 90% of programme costs are covered by the missions and churches themselves. A modest percentage of costs are recovered by the physical labour of clients on-location. State aid does occur on occasion, but can generally be described as minimal. Ryakhovsky reports that church-sponsored efforts usually occur despite, and not in cooperation with, local authorities.

The efforts of these anti-drug programmes are not limited to rehabilitation centres. Anti-drug activists are bad for business, and an Izkhod worker in the south of Moscow recently lost teeth and suffered a fractured jaw when passing out invitation cards to addicts waiting to purchase illegal drugs. After ROSKhVE protested about a drugstore at Petrovsko-Razumovskaya metro station in the north of the city which was concocting ever-new poisons for Russia's youth, municipal authorities shuttered the lucrative enterprise.

Non-Protestant reactions to these anti-drug efforts reach all across the map. A secular specialist has labelled the work at New Life's centre in Kingisepp region "on par with the results of the very best Russian centres for addiction treatment". New Life-Director Sergey Matevosyan was even called to the Kremlin in October 2005 and ceremonially presented with a medal by then-President Vladimir Putin. But two years later, a priest heading an Orthodox rehab centre in St. Petersburg, Maxim Pletnev, claimed that Protestant rehab centres were simply replacing one addiction with another. "They may be saving people from drugs," he conceded. "But these people then display a dependency on the sect very similar to narcotic dependency."

In the first two decades since communism, the politically-minded Moscow Patriarchate has initially addressed the top of Russia's society – the successful and moneyed classes. This prioritization has given Protestants considerable room to serve the bottom fringe of society, especially in non-European Russia. (Yet Professor Lazarev calls it a stereotype to assume that substance abusers stem from the lower echelons of society and from dysfunctional families.)



Does, as Pletnev implies, the danger of indoctrination exist among Protestant efforts? Is a specific worldview being forced upon desperate people against their actual will? Does a kind of brain-washing occur? At what point is a client in danger of losing his or her personal will? Must the whole package be accepted, or can a person successfully graduate from a Protestant programme while still remaining Orthodox, Muslim, or atheistic? Are rehab centres often co-responsible when clients break off therapy prematurely? Dr. Alexander Negrov, Rector of "St. Petersburg Christian University", reports on a worrisome tendency to use non-stop, marathon Bible reading as a remedy for temptation. Little research has been done on the theological content of Protestant therapy programmes. If funding were available, then Negrov would like to start.  
Addresses: New Life: [www.newliferus.ru](http://www.newliferus.ru); Good Samaritan: [www.narcostop.org](http://www.narcostop.org) (has English); Exodus (Izkhod) [ucxod.ru](http://ucxod.ru)